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### The Role of the Protagonist in "The Faerie Queene": A Study of the First Three Books

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## Reading List

John Bunyon, Pilgrim's Progress.

Geoffery Chaucer, "The tale of Sir Topaz" and "The Second Nun's Tale."

John Milton, Comus and Paradise Regained.

Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Romans

William Shakespeare, The Tempest and Measure For Measure.

Philpipp Sidney, An Apology For Poetry.

THE ROLE OF  
THE PROTAGONIST IN "THE FAERIE QUEENE":  
A STUDY OF THE FIRST THREE BOOKS

Gretchen Mertz  
English Honors Thesis  
April 28, 1980

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That Spenser was regarded as a great poet in his own time is clear from incidental remarks by such eminent critics as Sidney, and later, Milton. Yet they say little about Spenser in depth, so we are left to infer their opinions from theories of good poetry at the time. As had long been the case, poetry's purposes were felt to be to teach and to delight, and Spenser's Faerie Queene evidently fulfilled both of these. Edward Dowden, defending Spenser as a moralist in the late nineteenth century, says of Renaissance poetry:

poetry aims at something more than to decorate life; it is spoken of (by people in Spenser's time) as if it possessed some imperial authority, a power to bind and to loose, to sway man's total nature, to calm, to regulate and restrain, and also to free, to arouse, to dilate the spirit--power not to titillate a particular sense, but to discipline the will and mould a character.<sup>1</sup>

For two hundred years after its publication Spenser's Faerie Queene was thought to live up to this criteria, but in the nineteenth century interest in the moral content of the poem was discouraged in some criticism and sparse in any. William Hazlitt in 1818 wrote "the love of beauty, however, and not of truth, is the moving principle of his (Spenser's) mind,"<sup>2</sup> and advised readers to disregard the allegory.<sup>3</sup> Most Spenser critics in the romantic era were interested in only the picturesque side of the Faerie Queene, and this attitude carried on throughout the century. In 1875, James Russell Lowell wrote that though Spenser probably wanted to be a moralist, that aspect of his poetry is weakest. "The true use of him is as a gallery of pictures which we visit as the mood takes us, and were we spend an hour or two at a time, long enough to sweeten our perceptions, not so long as to cloy them."<sup>4</sup>

In 1884 Edward Dowden criticized this view as incomplete, and hailed Spenser as a moral, didactic poet.<sup>5</sup> His views stimulated a different approach to Spenser, for during much of the first sixty years of this century critics have searched for Spenser's moral meanings. The focus in this search was allegory; all the morality, all the meaning in the Faerie Queene was thought to lie there. Though much was explained through this approach (there have been analyses of Spenser's religious, political, moral allegory), such concentration on allegory as the source of all Spenser's meaning led to a lack of attention to the surface level and its effects. When they were studied, some of Spenser's most entrancing scenes, such as the Bower of Bliss, were regarded as accidents where Spenser let his real human nature show through. C.S. Lewis rightfully says, "Critics have talked as if there were a fatal discrepancy between Spenser's spiritual pretensions and the actual content of his poetry."<sup>6</sup>

Although this approach is still used, in the last 15-20 years there has been a shift in critical interest toward the surface of the text. According to Paul J. Alpers, "Book after book now urges us to return to the surface of the poem and to find its meanings there."<sup>7</sup> A.C. Hamilton and Alpers himself have been pioneers in this area. Hamilton has focused on the literal level of the allegory and on the structure of images in the whole poem. Alpers has done valuable work by concentrating on the episode as the basic structural unit and on its effect on the reader.

I will discuss another important area of the surface level of the text--the presentation of the knights who are protagonists in each Book, and what the presentation teaches us about their virtue and how to attain it. Each protagonist is an important element of

his or her Book and affects our response to the episodes in which he or she appears. To understand the total effect of the poem, it is essential to identify the response evoked by Spenser's presentation of the protagonists and to see how it contributes to the effect of each Book, and thence to the whole work.

To understand our response to each protagonist, we must look closely at some important scenes in which they appear in each Book. I will confine my discussion to the first three Books, for they not only offer such scenes, but they also offer a convenient juxtaposition of three quite different characters; thus our responses to those three Books (despite a certain structural similarity often pointed out in the first two) are quite different. The different experience of reading each Book is shaped largely by the different presentation of each knight.

# I

In each Book, the knight gives the reader a focus point in the vast world portrayed in the Faerie Queene. The world of Book I is huge: it include Faerie land and realms outside it, scenes from the underworld and from Una's parents' land, as well as an extended allegorical scheme with Una representative of truth and Duessa of false guidance. The scenes themselves are charming and compelling, but having a central protagonist enables readers to keep in mind their effect on a human character. So Redcrosse Knight in Book I provides the central focus for readers' concern.

Equally important, Redcrosse Knight offers examples of human behavior which the reader can react to, or judge. The other characters in the Book, being personified abstractions rather than human characters, often cannot be evaluated as a human being would

be. Our response to the protagonist as an ethical being is qualitatively different from our response to the abstract figures.

Furthermore, we know Redcrosse Knight is on a quest. Besides adding focus to the plot, Redcrosse Knight's progress in this quest provides criteria against which the reader can judge him. We learn at the beginning of the Book that he is an untried knight on a worthy quest; thus we are encouraged to judge him by his success in his mission. The armor he wears, marked with a red cross, identifies him as a Christian, and thus gives us a set of criteria--Christian ethics--to expect of him. Also, he is very eager:

And ever as he rode, his hart did earne  
To prove his puissance in battell brave  
upon his foe, and his new force to learne. (I,i,3)

Because of his untriedness, his duties as a Christian, and his eagerness, we are anxious to see how well he will perform his quest.

Soon we get to some specific temptation scenes where we can measure the knight's success. But Spenser introduces the first one subtly. Una and Redcrosse Knight are stuck by a storm, and subsequently lose their way, and being off one's path is very dangerous in quest stories. However, the narration of their getting off the way simply describes the event; it implies no objective judgment.

And this faire couple eke to shroud themselves were vaine.

Enforst to seeke some covert nigh at hand,  
A shadie grove not far away they spide,  
That promist ayde the tempest to withstand:  
Whose loftie trees yclad with sommers pride,  
Did spread so broad, that heavens light did hide.  
Not perceable with powre of any starre:  
And all within were pathes and allies wide,  
With footing worne, and leading inward farre:  
Faire harbour that to them seemes, so in they entred arre.

(I,i,6-7)

There are a few clues to the readers that the woods are dangerous

("heavens light did hide," "Faire harbour that them seemes" rather than is), but the initial search for cover is from the characters' viewpoint, and the description of the trees in the next stanza presumably reflects what is going on in their minds. Not until stanza 10 do they realize they are lost. Not until then does the reader realize they are lost either, for the trees have been occupying the reader also. So here the characters act as reflectors in the temptation to get lost (in calling them reflectors, I mean that the readers' attention is focused on what the characters' attention is, rather than on the characters), and not as models to be judged either positively or negatively.

However, a situation calling for objective judgment follows almost immediately, when Una warns Redcrosse Knight to be careful about the cave. The reader is immediately alerted to watch Redcrosse Knight's response to this advice and to judge his behavior after Una tells him she recognizes the place as Errour's den. His disregard of her good advice and the narrator's description of him as "full of fire and greedy hardiment" clearly mark him as a model of wrong behavior.

During this objective viewing by the reader, Spenser's treatment of Redcrosse Knight continues to change. Despite his clear faults, the narrator, by being sympathetic himself, induces sympathy for the knight: "God helpe the man so wrapt in Errours endlesse traine" (st. 18), and Una also shows concern for him. Readers now know they should feel concern as well as disapproval. Then Redcrosse Knight himself becomes a positive model when he defeats Errour. In half a canto he has been a reflector, a bad, and a good role model. The effect on the reader is first to identify with the characters without thinking (while they are getting lost), and immediately



afterwards to look at them objectively and judgmentally, thus realizing the ease of falling into error, the difficulty of clear-cut judgments, and the unreliability of initial responses.

In canto IV, we are introduced with Redcrosse Knight to the House of Pride and the Seven Deadly Sins. Here again, the knight acts as a reflector much of the time. The Palace is described to us as he sees it, and so are the court and the procession of Sins. However, we are also given further clues and knowledge all through. We know the House of Pride has weak foundation, that Lucifera is the daughter of Pluto, and that Duessa is a villainess (which Redcrosse Knight does not know). Yet the descriptions are beautiful and the court glamorous. Although the reader knows the House of Pride cannot be good, Spenser portrays it as very tempting.

Yet Redcrosse Knight is unimpressed, even though he has been completely deceived by Duessa and is being entertained by the courtiers. He behaves as a very positive model here, even though just at the beginning of this canto he was held up as a bad example by the narrator:

Young knight, what ever that dost armes professe,  
And through long labours hunttest after fame,  
Beware of fraud, beware of ficklenesse,  
In choice and change of thy deare loved Dame,  
Least thou of her beleewe too lightly blame,  
And rash misweening doe thy hart remove:  
For unto knight there is no greater shame,  
Than lightnesse and inconstancie in love;  
That doth this Redcrosse knights exsample plainly prove. (I,iv,i)

Although the reader knows better than Redcrosse Knight all that is going on here, he can hardly hold himself superior.

Then follows the discription of the six Deadly Sins (Pride having already been described in Lucifera), neither glamorous nor tempting. Rather it is frightening and aweing. It is an inset in the action of the plot, and the readers' feelings toward Redcrosse

Knight are temporarily suspended. The descriptions are varied enough for any reader to notice some similarities between himself or herself and some of the sins, and vivid enough to be frightening. The end of the procession with Satan lashing the team is so compelling that we take refuge in Redcrosse Knight's refusal to join the ride. He seems almost a champion here, and indeed soon becomes one when he fights with Sans Joy. In this canto, where the reader may be initially disposed to look down on the knight, he soon learns that he cannot pass judgment, for Redcrosse Knight's behavior under stress is admirable.

Some time later, after the Orgoglio episode, Redcrosse Knight is reunited with Una. Were the Faerie Queene capable of being simply translated into abstract terms we would no longer need to fear for Redcrosse Knight's moral state; he would be safe with Una. However, the narrator has told us that he is in a very weakened state; when first rescued he can hardly walk:

Whose feeble thighes, unable to uphold  
His pined corse, him scarce to light could beare,  
...and all his vitall powres  
Decayd, and all his flesh shronk up like withered flowres.  
(I,viii,40-41)

Even Una thinks he should recover before going on. They set forth bravely together, but whether Redcrosse Knight has the strength to withstand any immediate danger is an open question.

Immediately following the renewal of the journey comes the Des-paire episode. This episode is crucial in the progression of the reader's relationship to the knight. Sometime in this episode, the reader shifts from watching Redcrosse Knight to identifying with him.

When he first sees Trevisan, Redcrosse Knight reacts in his

usual style, eager to attack the problem. He encourages Trevisan to lead him to Despaire and boldly charges that villain with murder. But stanzas 33-36, the description of Despaire's cave, take the reader out of an evaluative position. They form an inset, not directly necessary to the plot. The first two, describing the general area, are eerie and spine-tingling (like a description from a horror story), and the description of Despaire in the third and fourth, complete with fresh corpse, quite frightening. Redcrosse Knight reacts bravely by challenging Despaire, but then Despaire begins his insidious argument.

Despaire's first three stanzas (38-40) sound good--death brings rest--, but there is the obvious problem that self-imposed death is by all authoratative accounts wrong. The reader must think of this discrepancy, and Redcrosse Knight brings it up in stanza 41, thus arguing on the side of the reader. But Despaire goes on, using some truth and warping it to support his argument.

Most of Despaire's words can be applied to the reader as well as the knight. Spenser makes Despaire appeal to a general sense of guilt:

Is not the measure of thy sinfull hire,  
High heaped up with huge iniquitie,  
Against the day of wrath, to burden thee? (I,ix,46)

The persuasion is so powerful that even if the reader retains his assurance that suicide is wrong, the provocation to despair is still felt.

When Despaire stops speaking at the end stanza 47, the narrator again focuses attention on the knight. Once again, the reader is watching him. But this time it is in pure sympathy. Even if the reader believes Redcrosse Knight is wrong, the preceeding passages

do not encourage judgment of him, nor does the description of his terror. The description of Redcrosse Knight with knife in hand is so compelling that it seems he may actually kill himself until the tension is broken by Una's intervention.

Una's words here bring relief, by breaking the emotional climax and the spell of Despaire, by saving Redcrosse Knight, and by repeating the reassuring axioms of soteriology. Yet, though comforting, they encourage humility and reliance on God's grace.

In the Despaire episode, Redcrosse Knight once again has reached a nadir (the first time being the Orgoglio episode), but this time the reader has been emotionally caught up too, and has not been encouraged to be judgmental. This emotionally draining episode is followed by the description of the House of Holiness, which removes the reader even further from a judgmental role.

Spenser's description of Coelia's house resembles a prayer of praise. Most of the description is a catalogue of the allegorical characters residing there, all of whom clearly represent some important virtue. Nothing but good is said of them, and a lot of good at that. Most of them are described in domestic terms, but a few receive more awesome language. In stanza 20, Fidelia's powers are described so:

And when she list poure out her larger spright,  
 She would commaund the hastie sunne to stay,  
 Or backward turne hiscourse from heavens hight;  
 Sometimes great hostes of men she could dismay;  
 Dry-shod to passe, she parts the fLOUDS in tway;  
 And eke huge mountains from their native seat  
 She would commaund, themselves to away,  
 And throw in raging sea with roaring threat,  
 Almightye God gave her such powre, and puissance great.

The eulogy on the House of Holiness is humbling to the reader, for clearly he or she cannot be as good as any of the allegorical char-

acters that populate it, for they have awesome power and virtue.

However, stanzas 24-29 return to Redcrosse Knight, who presents the considerably less awesome appearance of a penitent. He is clearly in a rather wretched state, described as "soule-diseased," and as having "Inward corruption, and infected sin," "proun humours," and "filthy blots of sinne," and as being in agony:

And bitter Penance with a yron whip,  
Was wont him to disple every day:  
That drops of bloud thence like a well did play;  
And sad Repentance used to embay,  
His bodie in salt water smarting sore,...

In which his torment often was so great,  
That like a Lyon he would cry and rore,  
And rend his flesh, and his own synewes eat. (I,x,27-28)

Redcrosse Knight appears as a passive penitent in this scene, for Patience, his doctor-confessor, is presented as a separate entity.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the reader is not in a position to judge him, for Redcrosse Knight is in a state of repentance. He is voluntarily undergoing this ordeal, he wears the standard ashes and sackcloth of a penitent, and the disease metaphors are inducive to compassion. He is being exorcized of his sins, and is in that respect a model of how to attain holiness. Because of Redcrosse Knight's wretched state, readers can hardly look up to him now, but they cannot pass judgment either.

From then on, Redcrosse Knight improves in moral standing. The next section of canto X consists of more praise of allegorical figures, Clarrisa, Mercie, the seven Beadsmen, and Contemplation, but now we know that their good influence is rubbing off on Redcrosse Knight. The Contemplation section, in the last 20 stanzas of the canto, is of particular importance.

When introducing him, Spenser implies Contemplation has some prophetic ability:

Great grace that old man to him given had;  
 For God he often saw from heavens hight,  
 All were his earthly eyes both blunt and bad,  
 And though great age had lost their kindly sight,  
 Yet wondrous quick and persant was his sight,  
 As Eagles eye, that can behold the Sunne: (I,x,47).

He reminds one of the ancient blind but divinely inspired prophets. Furthermore he has the power to show Redcrosse Knight a view of the new Jerusalem, and to tell him his destiny.

What we learn from Contemplation in this scene is that Redcrosse Knight is special. First he is special in shown the view at all: "Then come thou man of earth, and see the way,/ That never yet was seene of Faeries sonne"(I,x,52). Second, and more important, is his destiny:

for thee ordaind a blessed end:  
 For thou amongst those Saints, whom thou doest see,  
 Shalt be a Saint, and thine owne nations frend  
 And Patrone: thou St. George shalt called bee,  
 Saint George of mery England, the signe of victoree. (I,x,61)

Not only will he succeed in his quest and kill the dragon, or even be merely one of the elect, but he is our patron saint (if we're English, and a famous saint even if we're not), someone to be looked up to and revered. As far as the reader's relationship with Redcrosse Knight is concerned, this scene is the turning point of the Book I.<sup>9</sup>

Cantos 11 and 12 are of a different tone from the first ten cantos of the Book. Canto 11 describes the completion of his quest, so he can no longer be judged by whether or not he is on the right path toward fulfilling it. Although he does have some weak moments during the dragon fight, and does have to be succoured by providential falls into waters of life, he is not held up to our judgment during them, as he has been during other episodes in the Book.

Spenser portrays Redcrosse Knight as a champion in this episode. It starts with Una, who has so often in previous episodes come to his aid, asking him. Her address to him--"Deare knight...That all

these sorrowes suffer for my sake"--indicates that he is already performing service for her. The narrator dwells on the magnitude of Redcrosse Knight's task by emphasizing the dragon's strength (in earlier episodes the enemy's evil or disgustingness was emphasized more than his or her strength), and by invoking the muse to assist in describing the battle. Redcrosse Knight himself bids Una to withdraw before the battle for safety, a move of more assertion toward her than he has ever shown before.

On a more substantial level, this episode differs from earlier ones in that the reader has no special knowledge that the knight does not have, Redcrosse Knight is now fighting for others and not just for himself, and he is doing more in fighting the dragon than any normal individual. Often before, the reader was able to look down on Redcrosse Knight from some pedestal of greater knowledge--the reader knew better than the knight how the knight should behave--but now he knows only that Redcrosse Knight should defeat the dragon, and Redcrosse Knight himself, being an expert fighter, knows that at least as well. In fighting the dragon, Redcrosse Knight is using special skills as a knight; that is why he tells Una to stand away. He is the only person who is qualified to fight this battle.

It is these qualities, expressed on the surface level, that make us respond to Redcrosse Knight in this episode (and from now on in the Book) as a special champion. This response is appropriate to what is happening on the allegorical levels. Redcrosse Knight has just been explicitly identified as St. George, and now he is acting as a patron saint, protecting people. Furthermore, the number of days in the ordeal--three, the defeat of the dragon, and later, marriage with Una, associate Redcrosse Knight with Christ. No

wonder then that he is presented as a champion and hero at the surface level.

Redcrosse Knight in the last half of the Book passes from an object of evaluation to a model of a good person, from someone for the reader to judge to someone for the reader to look up to. The Despaire episode took the reader from a judgmental position, and the reverent description of the House of Holiness reinforced this change. Another change is accomplished when Contemplation reveals Redcrosse Knight's specialness; he can no longer be thought of as an Everyman character similar to ourselves.

Furthermore, in the last two cantos, Redcrosse Knight is portrayed as a champion. In the Dragon fight he battles overwhelming odds, but he is victorious. In canto 12 everyone is thanking and praising him; even the narrator now refers to him as "that doughtie Conquerour." As for his former life, stanza 16 puts a new color on that. On hearing of his misadventure, the King and Queen:

oft they did lament his lucklesse state,  
And often blame the too importune fate,  
That heaped on him so many wrathfull wreakes:  
For never gentle knight, as he of late,  
So tossed was in fortunes cruell freakes. (I,xii,16)

These misadventures now seem part of his heroism, rather than signs of weakness.

In Book I Redcrosse Knight models not so much his virtue, but how to acquire it. By the end of the Book he is holy; he has attained salvation. Our feelings toward him have changed over the Book, reflecting the complexities in the knight's progress. He has been saved by God's grace, and the ability of that grace to change the character we first appeared able to judge easily is humbling to us.

## II

In Book II, the protagonist knight is portrayed very differently,



contributing to a very different experience. Guyon is never held up to our judgment. A comparison of the scene in which we first meet with him with the initial description of Redcrosse Knight will show that the reader is encouraged to take a different attitude toward Guyon from the beginning.

Redcrosse Knight is described as having mighty arms and a silver shield, which are old and have seen much action, "Yet armes till that time did he never wield." Because he is untried and his arms are tried, the implication is that he is not yet worthy of them. Guyon is simply described as: "A goodly knight, all armed in harnesse meete,/ That from his head no place appeared to his feete" (II,i,5). His armor is appropriate, and he is wearing it well. The implication is that he knows what he is doing. Also we immediately learn Redcrosse Knight is starting on a quest, but we do not initially learn such a thing about Guyon. Redcrosse Knight's eagerness to succeed is emphasized, whereas Guyon appears calm and self-sufficient: "His carriage was full comely and upright,/ His countenance demure and temperate" (II,i,6). Altogether, Redcrosse Knight's untriedness is emphasized so that we tend to measure him by his success, while there is no such emphasis in our introduction to Guyon, who initially appears as simply a positive role model.

Yet Guyon is not a perfected model, for he is trapped by Archimago. Being picked by Archimago as an appropriate person to attack Redcrosse Knight is a questionable honor. On one hand, Archimago thinks Guyon likely to listen to his request, and strong enough to have a chance against Redcrosse Knight in a fight, but on the other hand, he is also an easy dupe. Much of Guyon's behavior under deception does him credit: he stops to help what he perceives to be two helpless people in distress, and speaks highly of Redcrosse Knight's

achievements while saying:

Nathlesse he shortly shall againe be tryde,  
And fairely quite him of th'imputed blame,  
Else be ye sure he dearely shall abyde. (II,i,20)

Nonetheless, when he first sees Redcrosse Knight, he is "inflamd with wrathfulnesse" and he charges without explanation. Yet he pulls back just in time, and neither Redcrosse Knight nor the narrator passes negative judgment on him.

Shortly afterwards, in the Amavia episode, Guyon behaves almost perfectly, although the emphasis in that episode is more on Amavia than on Guyon. Guyon himself, in the first canto and throughout the Book, is not held up for our judgment. We know he still has further to go in being temperate, but his basic goodness is unquestioned. We do not have the judgmental attitude toward Guyon as we did toward Redcrosse Knight. Therefore we concentrate more on the events Guyon experiences than on Guyon himself, and we learn, as he does, much about temperance. Guyon usually behaves perfectly as far as his knowledge extends, but, as in the deception by Archimago, that is not always far enough. He is more of a model learner than simply a general positive role model.

Most of Guyon's adventures consist of his exposure to various forms of temperance and of course the lack thereof. He gets into virtually no serious trouble in the first five cantos (unlike Redcrosse Knight); rather he spends his time learning about the virtues of Medina and the dangers of extreme wrath. As Guyon is confronted with each intemperate enemy, he at first does not recognize exactly what the character is. Though moved by Furor's treatment of Phedon to fight with him, he does not know how to defeat him until told by the Palmer. Once he learns, however, he

is quick to put his knowledge into practice, and soon restrains Occasion and her son.

In canto VI, he is introduced to the opposite extreme, the new danger of intemperate luxury and relaxation. The reader is introduced to this danger before Guyon is, one of the few times in Book II when the reader knows any more than the knight. He or she is exposed to both the temptation to which Cymochles is exposed and its effects on him. Phaedria's temptation of Cymochles in the Bowre is very tempting, an exquisite piece of Spenser's work, and also at the beginning of canto VI the narrator has said that resisting this type of intemperance is harder than resisting the last type. Therefore when Guyon unknowingly steps on to her boat, the reader is curious not simply to see if he will measure up to a standard, but to see how he, who has been presented as a kind of model, will handle such a difficult and delicate situation.

As it turns out, nothing terribly exciting happens. Guyon soon learns what Phaedria is:

But when he saw her toy, and gibe, and geare,  
And passe the bonds of modest merimake,  
Her dalliance he despisd, and follies did forsake. (II, vi, 21)

He next tries to persuade her to take him back to the land, but when she refuses, he retains his self-control. By the time they arrive at the Bowre and she shows him the tempting sights:

he was wise, and warie of her will,  
And ever held his hand upon his hart:  
Yet would not seeme so rude, and thewed ill,  
As to despise so courteous seeming part,  
That gentle Ladie did to him impart,  
But fairely tempring fond desire subdewd,  
And ever her desired to depart. (II, vi, 26)

Eventually he gets away without any serious harm, but he has displayed temperance to us, and perhaps more important, both he and

we have been shown the dangers of the intemperate extreme of luxury.

Guyon's next adventure is the Mammon episode, much more dangerous than the Phaedria one. It is horrible rather than pleasant, and Mammon is determined to make him fall. Most of the time, however, our attention is directed toward the scenes described, rather than toward Guyon. They are compelling, though horrible, at times forming something of an inset in the plot (our attention is rivetted on the descriptions rather than on characters' actions). During these sections, Guyon seems to be merely a reflector of events, allowing Spenser to write some of his great descriptive passages. And great they are. Starting with the description of Mammon as Guyon first sees him counting his money, on through the description of the fiends around the entry-way and the gold-making room, are scenes which rank with the Deadly Sins and Despaire for their horror and grip. We see what Guyon sees and to that extent experience what he experiences, but during that time we are hardly aware of his presence. We learn about the evils of Mammon's type of intemperance from the scenes themselves, and Guyon does little more than reflect them.

However, though Guyon's activity in the Mammon episode adds relatively little to our experience of it, its position in the story of his development adds a lot. His presence shows us the value of the episode as an educational experience. Guyon is very curious throughout the episode. When he first sees Mammon, he holds him until he says his name, and he goes down to the cave with him because he wants to know:

What secret place (quoth he) can safely hold  
 So huge a masse, and hide from heavens eye?  
 Or where hast thou thy wonne, that so much gold  
 Thou canst preserve from wrong and robbery? (II, vii, 20)

He keeps wanting to know if the gold is "well-got," and he asks who Philotime is and Tantalus and Pilate as well. The whole trip is a result of his curiosity.

Nonetheless, it is very dangerous. Frank Kermode regards it as a "total temptation," a temptation on all levels of temperance.<sup>10</sup> Maurice Evans regards Guyon's separation from his Palmer as a clear sign of danger.<sup>11</sup> The narrator tells the readers in stanza 26 that a fiend is following Guyon and at each time Guyon refuses an offer of Mammon's notes that the fiend gnashes his teeth, for any slip of Guyon's would mean his destruction. If the fiend's presence is not enough, we learn at the end of the episode that Guyon collapses from exhaustion and passes as dead.

The danger raises the question of whether Guyon should have entered the cave at all. Harry Berger, Jr. supports the camp of those who think Guyon should not have gone, saying Guyon's curiosity here is misplaced.<sup>12</sup> Frank Kermode, on the other hand, compares the whole episode to Christ's temptation in the wilderness.<sup>13</sup> The narrator, however, does not say. Nor are we encouraged to judge. Our attention is taken up with scenes themselves. Of course when Mammon makes Guyon an offer we pull back from the scene a little to see what Guyon will do, but we are not too surprised that he always refuses. Whether Guyon was right or wrong to enter the cave does not seem to be the point, but rather that the experience contributes to his development as a temperate person.<sup>14</sup>

His development of temperance is the subject of the Book. We know that despite his virtue at the beginning, he was imperfect in knowledge, and vulnerable to Archimago's trick. His Palmer frequently has to give him advice. He has undertaken a quest against Acrasia, a font of intemperance, and is evidently being strengthened for his eventual meeting with her. He has already learned about the dangers of excessive anger from Furor and the example of Perochles, and of excessive luxury from Phaedria and Cymochles. Now he is tempted with the treasures of the world, money and external honor; he must learn their dangers or fail. While Guyon goes through these adventures, we see the lessons too, and we learn not only the different types of intemperance, but also the importance of learning about them.

We have seen that it is important to learn the temptations of intemperance and the complex forms it can take, and next Guyon is exposed to his own self and history. After he is saved by Arthur, the two of them proceed to Alma's castle, and there Guyon goes on another tour. This time there is no danger, the tour guide is good, and the scenes are of something genuinely good, rather than a temptation to evil. It is also, in a way, nearer to us. At first it seems foreign, part of the world of Faerie land, but we soon recognize it--the human body.

What Spenser seems to be emphasizing here, and in canto X, devoted to the histories of Arthur's and Guyon's respective countries, is the importance to temperance of knowing your own body and history. The body is surrounded by foes, anxious to attack at any weak spot. It must be constantly and carefully defended. Each part described, the porter tongue, the steward Diet, must

perform his function well or else (presumably the fate of Pyrochles or Cymochles will result). Alma also introduces the knights to her three counselors, who see future, present, and past. In the library of the third both Guyon and Arthur finds a book on the history of his country and spends the next canto reading it. That these books are in the library of one of Alma's chief counselors indicates that knowledge of them is important to be fully temperate.

Though Guyon is exposed to all this, he does not play an active role at all. He does not even have any choices to make (whether or not to succumb to temptation), as he has in past episodes. Still, he does display curiosity. The reason for the tour is that he and Arthur requested it: "They her (Alma) besought of favour speciall" (II,ix,20). In acquiescence she takes them to every part of the castle, even the kitchen ("ne spard for nicenesse none") and Port Esquiline. Their reaction is wonder and delight:

Which goodly order, and great workmans skill  
Whenas those knights beheld, with rare delight,  
And gazing wonder they their minds did fill;  
For never had they seene so straunge a sight. (II,ix,33)

When they find the history books in Eumnestes' library:

Wherat they burning both with fervent fire,  
Their countries ancestry to understond,  
Crav'd leave of Alma, and that aged sire  
To read those bookes; who gladly graunted their desire. (II,ix,60)

Both knights become so entranced with the books that they have to be persuaded to leave them:

Beguild thus with delight of novelties,  
And naturall desire of countreys state,  
So long they red in those antiquities,  
That how the time was fled, they quite forgate,  
Till gentle Alma seeing it so late,  
Perforce their studies broke, and them besought  
To thinke, how supper did them long awaite.  
So half unwilling from their bookes them brought,  
And fairely feasted, as so noble knights she ought. (II,x,77)

Whenever Guyon is referred to during the tour of the castle or the history reading section, it is with mention of his curiosity and wonder.

Nonetheless, one may wonder how the whole section of Alma's castle relates to Guyon's development as a temperate person. During most of the narrative he acts simply as a reflector, whose function is merely to draw our attention to Spenser's portrayal of the ideally governed body. Even as a model learner of temperance, his reactions, aside from curiosity, do not display any concrete virtues; he does not even know the castle is a body. Fitting this episode into Guyon's total development is left for us. We know that he has just been learning about the different forms intemperance can take, and now he is exposed to a model of temperance which we recognize as the human body. Apparently, exposure to this body is necessary before he is ready to meet Acrasia.

Throughout the Book, Guyon shows no obvious development, but by the end he is qualified to meet Acrasia, for he does so competently and successfully. Though still occasionally distracted by fakers of distress and even appealing women, he has no serious trouble capturing Acrasia. He displays in the final canto essentially the same virtues he has all along, self-control, submission to his Palmer's guidance, as well as wonder at various phenomena.

The history of his development has not been one of character change (or in change of reader attitude toward him), but of his exposure to various aspects of temperance or intemperance. As he is exposed to each temptation (or even merely witnesses the dangers of Furor), we assume he has partaken of temperance in that area, whether in withstanding excessive anger, luxury, or greed. When he



tours Alma's castle, we infer that he incorporates the ideally governed body into his temperance. Guyon does not change as a person (as Redcrosse Knight does in becoming more dependent on grace), but rather incorporates more and more complexities of his virtue.

Guyon is not eager to succeed like Redcrosse Knight, but is eager to learn. Besides his temperance in withstanding each temptation, the qualities Guyon most often displays (and Spenser most often draws attention to), are curiosity and wonder. He is awed by Furor's cruelty and Mammon's cave, and delighted by Alma's castle. Guyon develops his virtue, not by changing from intemperate to temperate, but by learning the many facets of temperance. In this way Spenser does justice to the complexity of the virtue and to the importance of learning.

### III

The knight in Book III is presented very differently from either Guyon or Redcrosse Knight and therefore affects her Book differently. Her problem is not to attain her virtue (as Redcrosse Knight must attain holiness), nor to develop different aspects of it through experience (as Guyon does), but to exemplify it as a worthy quality for a human to have. There are many different conceptions of love and chastity portrayed in this Book, and the characters and readers must learn to distinguish among them.

Ideas about romance were flourishing in Spenser's day. The Courtly Love scenario which had long held sway was undergoing vital transformations. Cruel mistresses were going out of vogue. Spenser himself contributed to this trend in the Amoretti and Epithalamion, in which the narrator marries the object of his love (an impossibility in Courtly Love). In the Renaissance, love was

perceived as a stronger force than reason which, if properly directed, could enoble the lover, but which, if improperly directly or channeled, could lead to a state of reasonless passion and/or lust. A big concern in love topics was the importance of external beauty in the loved one--did it necessarily imply inward virtue. The idealists, represented by Castiglione in The Courtier and Sidney in Astrophel and Stella, held that it did, although its outward appearance could be disguised. For the highly rational Elizabethans, giving themselves over to passion for an unworthy object was a supreme danger, yet, because of the passion, the danger of misinterpretation was always present in love.

Another problem in Book III is the reconciliation of chastity and love. Chaste mistresses of courtly lovers were thought of (or at least written of) as distant and cruel, impervious to affection. Lack of chastity, however, was thought to be a terrible vice, particularly in a woman. Closely related is the problem of how the strength sometimes necessary to defend chastity can be reconciled with the tenderness of love. A major danger in Book III, perhaps the major danger, is misinterpretation of various types of love and lovers. It starts with Britomart herself, in both the readers' views toward her and her views toward herself and others.

When we are first introduced to Britomart, she seems quite distant. She is disguised as a man, and the narrator speaks of her as if she were indeed a male knight with an aged squire, referring to her with masculine pronouns. We recognize her as an important character after she knocks Guyon off his horse, and then the narrator offers a few more pieces of information: her spear is enchanted, and she is a "single damzell," "the famous Britomart," looking for

a lover seen in a looking-glass. But since the narrator does not put these pieces together for us, they whet our curiosity rather than satiating it, and Britomart remains something of an enigma throughout the first canto. She also seems very impervious. Her overthrow of Guyon seems somewhat abrupt, and though she travels with the knights for some time, her leaving of them is entirely unemotional; she simply waits a certain space of time and, when they do not return, goes on without them. She is unaffected by the sight of Florimell, although Spenser's description of that lady's fear is compelling:

The whiles faire Britomart, whose constant mind  
Would not so lightly follow beauties chace,  
Ne reckt of Ladies Love, did stay behynd,  
And them awayted there a certain space,...  
But when she saw them gone she forward went,  
With stedfast corage and stout hardiment. (III,i,19)

We are assured of Britomart's virtue, but at this early point in the Book she does not seem very human. Between this presentation of the exemplar of chastity and Guyon's recent destruction of the Bower of Bliss and all its erotic pleasures, it is hard to see chastity as a very warm or human virtue.

However, in cantos 2 and 3 we are given a very different impression of Britomart. Here she is a young girl with very human feelings of uncertainty. Near the beginning of her conversation with Redcrosse Knight she deceives him about her feelings for Artegall in order to get more information from him, and we learn of her secret pleasure on hearing his praises. Here too we learn of her feelings as she first fell in love and started out on her quest. That she falls in love at all shows that her feelings are not impervious to change, and we soon see the strength of her emotions. She gets sick, can't sleep, and has bad dreams from the power of her love. When Glaucè advises

her to try to repress her love with reason, she tries unsuccessfully. She goes to church "With great devotion, and with little zeale." She blushes when she realizes Merlin knows who she is and is hopeful after he reassures her. She is inspired as Glaucè describes Angela to her. After the third canto she no longer seems distant to the reader, yet her human aspects do not indicate failure on her part (in contrast to Redcrosse Knight who seemed most human when he was off his proper track in some way), but sensitivity and tenderness. The presentation of Britomart in cantos II and III is a strong indication that chastity does not have to be a cold or arrogant virtue.

An especially interesting aspect of Britomart's humanity is her ability to misinterpret signals related to love. When she first falls in love with Artegall, she is not aware that she has done so:

Sad, solemn, sowre, and full of fancies fraile,  
 She woxe; yet wist whe nether how nor why.  
 She wist not, silly Mayd, what she did aile,  
 Yet wist she was not well at ease perdy;  
 Yet thought it was not love, but some melancholy" (III, ii,27)

Once she realizes that she is in love, she thinks her situation must be hopeless. She has no Una or Palmer to set her straight (for there are very few abstractions in Book III), but only Glaucè, and the two of them have to struggle to find an appropriate course of action. Even after they seek out Merlin, they are afraid to tell him the whole truth. Though he is able to reassure them, appropriate interpretation of feelings is evidently not a given. Spenser's description of Britomart's uncertainty does not encourage us to blame her; our impulse is rather to reassure her, and it also shows us the necessity of understanding love and chastity.

We have also seen, in the second half of the first canto, two examples of misinterpretation between individuals, one of Britomart and one by her. Each of these misinterpretations reveals the mis-

taken individual's conception of love. Malacasta, on seeing Britomart disguised as a man, becomes sexually attracted to her. Then Britomart misinterprets Malacasta's signals and thinks she is sincerely in love:

the chaste damzell, that had never priefe  
Of such malengine and fine forgerye,  
Did easely beleve her strong extremitye. (III,i,53)

After that, Malacasta misinterprets Britomart's courteous behavior toward her: "Which she misconstruing, therby esteemd/ That from like inward fire that outward smoke had stemmed" (III,i,55). These misunderstandings reveal Britomart's high regard for love:

Forthy she would not in discourteise wise  
Score the faire offer of good will profest;  
For great rebuke it is love to despise,  
Or rudely sdeigne a gentle harts request. (III,i,55)

She has such a high conception of love that until she learns more she cannot even imagine lust. Malacasta is a reverse character: she misinterprets Britomart because she cannot imagine anything but lust.

The problems of interpretation in which Britomart is involved in the first three cantos affect our response to a number of episodes in Book III at which she is not present by preparing us for misinterpretation and by allowing us to judge the characters as human and see the effect of their feelings on them. We meet Marinell as she knocks him over, but she is not present as the narrator tells us his history. He, too, suffers from misinterpretation. An oracle has predicted that: "of a woman he should have much ill;/ A virgin straunge and stout him should dismay or kill" (III,iv,25), and he and his mother take it to mean he should avoid any woman's love. Marinell is clearly another misinterpreter.

What our meeting with Britomart adds is a point of comparison

in acting under misinterpretation. Britomart, on hearing of her destiny, actively seeks it; Marinell on the contrary seeks to avoid his. More important, Marinell shows disdain for love that Britomart never does. Britomart would not be rude to Malacasta when she believes her in love, but Marinell shows no concern for the many women in love with him:

many Ladies fayre did oft complaine,  
That they for love of him would algates dy:  
Dy, who so list for him, he was loves enemy. (III,iv,26)

So although we can sympathize with Marinell for making a human mistake, we nonetheless see that he has not behaved ideally under the influence of that mistake.

Almost immediately following, we return to the Florimell chase, which started in canto I. Florimell's danger from the forester has been removed by Timias only to be supplanted by her fear of Arthur, whom she mistakenly fears equally. We sympathize with Florimell's mistake because we have already been shown that much innocent suffering can accompany misinterpretation. Spenser does not even need to go into great depth about Florimell's suffering because we have already seen characters suffering from their mistakes and can infer in Florimell's case. Yet we also see that Florimell, unlike Britomart, is making no attempt to help herself other than by fleeing. She wants to protect her chastity, but all she does is run. Britomart represents a different kind of chastity, one that involves strength as well as regard for celibacy.

Britomart appears little during the middle section of Book III (only once to talk about her ancestors), but she reappears in the important final episode--the rescue of Amoret from Busyrane. To understand Britomart's role in this episode, we must understand

what is happening to Amoret. We know that her captivity is interfering with her relationship to Scudamore, but we also need to know why. The Mask presented at Busyrane's House gives us some help. The Mask presents a view of love which, according to Thomas Roche, can be interpreted in several ways. He himself interprets it in the light of sonnet images. The first part, Roche says, with the six pairs of abstract figures marching "forth in faire degree," shows the progress of a courtship, starting with the gay and irresponsible Fancy and Desire, and leading through Doubt and Fear to Grief and Fury. The second part, with Amoret being tortured by Cruelty and Despight, Roche, again working from sonnet images, sees as the type of celibacy displayed by the traditional Cruel Mistress of Courtly Love.<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis sees the whole Mask as a portrayal of the "deep human suffering" underlying Courtly Love.<sup>16</sup>

Pointing out that this Mask was originally presented at Amoret's wedding feast, Roche suggests that Amoret saw it then (and still sees it) as a picture of the horrors of love. She thinks that marriage must necessarily be similar and is therefore torn between her love for Scudamore and her fear of marriage. This is a serious misinterpretation of love and chastity on Amoret's part which causes her great suffering.

Britomart's rescue of her is therefore a triumph of the true nature of love and chastity. In Britomart, the two are combined: she is chaste and she loves Artegall. Thus she can rescue Amoret from the false idea that love cannot be chaste.

Britomart is in some ways the most human character of the three protagonists, and also the most complete embodiment of the virtue she patronizes. Redcrosse Knight becomes a holy person, and Guyon learns about temperance, but Britomart contains within herself the

different qualities of chastity. She teaches us about chastity simply by being who she is. Her human aspects, tenderness, misinterpretation, uncertainty, and even suffering in love, are an integral part of love, and her strength and imperviousness in the face of danger, lust, and Busyrane's flames are equally necessary to chastity.

Focusing on reader response to the protagonists in the first three Books of the Faerie Queene reveals that Redcrosse Knight exemplifies the passage from weakness to holiness, that Guyon is a model of learning about temperance, and that Britomart is a model of love and chastity together. These revelations about the characters have implications for their Books and the whole work.

Redcrosse Knight's success is humbling to the us, since the character who was first placed under our judgment becomes exalted over us. This instilled humility is appropriate to the virtue of holiness, for holiness can be attained only through humility. We are now prepared to admire Guyon when we meet him, and to learn about his virtue. Since Guyon acts as a reflector through so much of Book II, and we see what he does, we as well as he learn about the different aspects of temperance necessary for the development of it. Yet, because temperance is a virtue of restraint and self-sufficiency, Britomart's attachment to another person is refreshing. The unity of love and chastity in the person of Britomart teaches us as well as Amoret that the two are compatible. In her we also see that strength and tenderness can be combined. Our responses to the characters are part of an educative process served by the whole poem, and help Spenser fashion the reader into a "noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline."



## NOTES

- 1 Edward Dowden, "Spenser, the Poet and the Teacher," in Spenser's Critics, William R. Mueller, ed. (Syrucuse: Syrucuse University Press, 1959), p. 111.
- 2 William Hazlitt, "On Chaucer and Spenser," in Spenser's Critics, p. 74.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 75-76.
- 4 James Russell Lowell, "Spenser," in Spenser's Critics, p. 93.
- 5 Dowden, "Spenser, the Poet and Teacher," in Spenser's Critics.
- 6 C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 321.
- 7 Paul J. Alpers, The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 4.
- 8 Paul J. Alpers argues on page 38 of The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene" that Patience does not appear as a separate entity since the name is not italicized in stanza 29 (as Spenser's personifications elsewhere are). Readers would therefore see Redcrosse Knight as having recovered through his own patience. This theory may work, even though in stanzas 23-27 the knight seems very passive and Patience is italicized in that section.
- 9 Actually, Redcrosse Knight's identity as St. George is clear to the readers from the beginning of the Book, since he carries a shield with a red cross and the narrator caually calls him St. George near the beginning of canto 2. But this is the first time the significance of the knight's identity is pointed out, and of course the first time Redcrosse Knight learns of it, which also removes the last difference in knowledge between reader and knight as to the condition of the knight.
- 10 Frank Kermode, "The Cave of Mammon," in Elizabethan Poetry, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, 2 (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1960), p. 159.
- 11 Maurice Evans, "The Fall of Guyon," in Spenser: A Collection of Critical Essays, Harry Berger, Jr., ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), p. 18.
- 12 Harry Berger, Jr., The Allegorical Temper (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 18.

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- 13 Kermode, "The Cave of Mammon."
- 14 This interpretation is supported by Milton's reading of the episode in Aereopagitica. After saying that virtue which has no experience in evil is empty, Milton attributes Guyon's experience in the cave to Spenser's desire to show that one must learn about evil and still abstain from it.
- 15 Thomas P. Roche, The Kindly Flame (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 73-75.
- 16 C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, p. 340.

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